

WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**LABOR ARCHIVES OF WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS**

**PHIL BEREANO OF WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION, AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION, ACT UP SEATTLE**

INTERVIEWEE: PHIL BEREANO

INTERVIEWER: SAUL GONZALEZ

SUBJECTS: WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION, NATIONAL RAINBOW COALITION, GAY COMMUNITY, LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY, AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, ACT UP, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, LARRY GOSSETT, EL CENTRO DE LA RAZA, DIVERSITY, COALITION BUILDING, COMMUNITY LIAISONS, MULTI-RACIAL ORGANIZING

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SAUL 00:00:12

All right, so our first question is, what is your name? Can you please spell out your first and last name?

PHIL 00:00:22

Philip with one L. P-H-I-L-I-P. Formally, I use the middle initial L and last name is Bereano, B-E-R-E-A-N-O.

SAUL 00:00:34

Awesome. How old are you? What is your birthday? And where were you born?

PHIL 00:00:46

Oh, wow. Okay. My birthday is coming up in June, June, 15. I'm a Gemini. I will be 84 years old. And where was I born? New York City, Manhattan.

SAUL 00:01:04

What gender, if any, do you identify with? What are your pronouns?

PHIL 00:01:08

Male, he/him/his.

SAUL 00:01:12

And what race or ethnicity do you identify as?

PHIL 00:01:16

Excuse me? oh, I didn't ask you your pronouns.

SAUL 00:01:20

Oh, yes, I use any pronouns.

PHIL 00:01:23

Okay. It, including it?

SAUL 00:01:27

Yeah. And what race or ethnicity do you identify as?

PHIL 00:01:33

I'm Caucasian, I'm white. I have Hispanic blood, but I'm not predominantly--from Spain, but I'm not--I'm predominantly middle European.

SAUL 00:01:49

All right. And then, what was your life story prior to joining the Rainbow Coalition? Did you grow up in Washington state, or did you move here? And if so, when and why?

PHIL 00:02:01

I'm an East Coast guy, and I moved here in 1975, mainly because I was fired from the Cornell faculty. And colleagues that I knew professionally here at the University of Washington were starting a new program called social management of technology, and asked me if I'd be interested in applying. They had one slot open for either a lawyer or a planner, and I have both law degrees and regional planning degrees. And so the timing was perfect. I applied and was accepted. Came here with tenure, which was, in retrospect, important for me to have requested. I mean, the visit here went very well, and the director of the program drove me to the airport to leave, rather than getting a graduate student to do it. And he said to me, in effect, "How do you think you might respond if we made you an offer?" And I said, "I think you're doing some really interesting stuff here, and I like the plans that you're making, but of course, if you make me an offer, it should be with tenure." Now I had been teaching for five years at Cornell and was published and knew him through professional associations and stuff like that, so it wasn't an outrageous ask.

And when the offer came, it was with tenure, which since a lot of what I did, professionally and in the community was considered quote "controversial," having tenure protected me because my appointment was through the College of Engineering, and my areas of work were evaluating technologies along their social,

political, economic, legal aspects and ramifications. So to be honest with you, most of the donors to the College of Engineering represent firms and companies that don't particularly want critical analyses of their technologies that they've made all their money. [laughs] So it was a lot of stress in the relationship and the tenure protected me.

SAUL 00:05:03

Were you involved in electoral politics prior to the Jesse Jackson campaign, and why did you become involved in that campaign, and what led you to the Washington State Rainbow Coalition?

PHIL 00:05:14

Well, that's a lot of questions. Yes, I've been involved in politics since I was a kid in New York City. My mother and I were involved in efforts to reform efforts within the Democratic Party in New York City, which we're talking now about the 1950's, 1960's. And I came from a family that was always very interested in what was going on. My grandmother, my dad's mother, wrote a kind of autobiography, and when she was being courted by my grandfather, she talked about how her family invited him over for dinner, and they would quote "talk about the affairs of the day." So it's in the cultural context within which I grew up to be interested and involved in things.

I don't remember the exact dates of the Jesse Jackson campaign or of the formulation of the Rainbow Coalition. I went back and found a date of 1993 that I did an event which I'll talk to you about. But can you refresh my memory about what the dates were of his campaign, Jackson's campaign?

SAUL 00:06:54

Yeah, so that would be '84, and then once again in '88.

PHIL 00:07:00

I think it was that the later campaign, he spoke at the Seattle Center, at the mural amphitheater, as I recall, and I was asked by local organizers to introduce him. So what do you have as the date of the formation of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition?

SAUL 00:07:26

I would say around like '84 there was a lot of work around the Jesse Jackson campaign, and then obviously it grew more.

PHIL 00:07:34

Okay, so I was pretty much involved in the organizing since the beginning, but I don't think I was particularly involved in Jackson's '84 campaign. As I say, I think it was his second campaign when the event was held at the Seattle Center, and I remember chatting with him before, you know, I introduced him, "Hi, I'm Phil Bereano. I'm going to be introducing you." Et cetera, et cetera. And I'm pretty sure that was his second campaign. But I do remember the early days of the and the earliest meetings of the Rainbow Coalition. I just didn't have the calendar date. We met at the Central Area Motivation Project, CAMP, on 18th [Avenue].

SAUL 00:08:35

And can you talk a little bit about why you were involved, what led you to your involvement in the Rainbow?

PHIL 00:08:42

Well, as I say, I've always been involved in community politics. I moved here in 1975, and I had been involved in a number of things in the late 70's, and always of course with a progressive kind of bend. And so, for

example, in 1979, I went illegally to Cuba through--there was a center for Cuban studies in New York City that put these things together. We left from Montreal, you know, so that my passport was just stamped with the Canadian stamps, and the Cuban entry stamp was on a separate piece of paper, and so on. And I was involved in a very early men's group here that was feminist in orientation.

So I began to know and work with a lot of the people who became co-founders, or whatever you want to call it, of the Rainbow Coalition. So when this thing was nucleating, I was one of the people, and I was a gay activist, so I certainly brought that perspective into the mix. Yeah, I think that's my earliest recollections, right. And we had these meetings, as I say, at CAMP, and yeah.

Now I was also as you may know, getting very active in the American Civil Liberties Union, and I was on the board of the state affiliate. And eventually, not at the time that we're focusing on, but eventually, after that, I became a member of the National Board of the ACLU, where I was for twenty-five years. So a lot of my activism was channeled into civil liberties kinds of issues and through the ACLU.

And then later on, of course, during the AIDS crisis, I got involved in the formation of ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power]. But that was by that stage, we're talking now about the late 80's. The Rainbow Coalition, the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, wasn't, to my recollection, really very strong and active at that time. Is that your understanding? Yeah.

SAUL 00:12:07

Awesome. And was there anything in particular--actually, what role did you play in the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, and what were the organization's activities while you were involved?

PHIL 00:12:20

Well, I wouldn't say that I was one of the leaders. Let's put it that way. I had other activities in the community, like the ACLU and civil liberties where I would definitely say my role was a more leadership role. But there were not, in my recollection, very many LGBTQ people active in the Rainbow Coalition. So certainly, I guess to some extent, I was considered as a liaison to that community. We had a number of major battles, political battles here with attempts to repeal the Seattle city civil rights legislation that protected gay people in housing and et cetera. Which, of course, the ACLU was very involved in. Yeah, so I think that was sort of the role that I would be set to play.

However, when I said to you about the date 1993, when Larry Gossett first decided to run for the [King] County council, and he had his big kickoff event, his kickoff campaign, he asked me if I would give the keynote speech, the keynote talk, and that was in 1993. I looked it up when he joined, when he was elected to the council, it might have been in the fall of '92, I don't know. His bio says in 1993 he was elected to the King County Council. So that probably was the fall of '93. So I of course knew Larry and worked with him through the Rainbow Coalition.

And there were a number of other people active in the Rainbow Coalition that I did work with. I did a certain amount of work with folks from El Centro de la Raza, and yeah. I knew, I knew Bob Santos, and I'm thinking about some of the people who were the most active in different communities. And I did not know, of the ones who were usually noted from that period, I did not know Bernie Whitebear, who was very prominent in the Native American community. But certainly in terms of the Asian American community, the Latino community, the Black community, as well as a lot of progressive white activists. I had lots of connections and did lots of issue organizing with them.

SAUL 00:15:37

And in relation to that, could you talk a little bit about what communities did the Rainbow Coalition organize in? What were the demographics of the Washington State Rainbow, and how did the Rainbow approach race, gender, and sexuality, and how does that impact the organizing of the Rainbow?

PHIL 00:15:57

Well, again, you're packing a lot into your questions. I don't know whether I have a particular take on responding to that, as compared to other people whom you're interviewing. The Rainbow Coalition, obviously, was an early manifestation of kind of politics, or political currents or whatever, that are even more prominent today. That's to say, you know, you take something like El Centro, if you know the history. Folks--I was not involved, this is prior to my time--took over this abandoned school building and declared that it was going to be, it's like the African American History Museum down on MLK in the Central District. It was the same thing. It was an abandoned school building, and it was taken over by activists, and after a period of time, the city or the school board said, "Okay, you can have it," kind of thing.

So the Rainbow Coalition did not, in my recollection, play a particularly strong leadership role in LGBT organizing. There were other organizations in that community that did, but of course it was very supportive. And I guess you could say that also about the various ethnic communities, there were leadership organizations. The Rainbow Coalition was a coalition, I guess that's the best way to--it was a way for people to be supportive of other communities of which they were not primarily a member, which I think was very important for there to be that kind of cross fertilization and cross support. And the Rainbow Coalition served that purpose. And then, of course, it did provide a focus for the Jesse Jackson campaigns, yes.

But it's very interesting, I haven't thought this through, why it sort of tapered off in terms of strength and effectiveness. It may have been that the organizing within the individual communities became so strong and so prominent that people were certainly continued to be, reflexively, continued to be supportive of things that were going on in other communities. You know, I mean, there was still a lot of cross support, but I don't recall. I mean, after a period of time, it wasn't like the Rainbow Coalition met regularly and said, "Okay, now we have to deal with this issue that the Black community is facing," sort of thing. But it did provide, the Washington State Rainbow Coalition certainly did provide a structure for a lot of support. Could that support have come? Would it have come in the same way? Well, there would have been attempts to do it, but I don't know if they would have been as effective. I mean, it became important if you want to support something that is facing a particular community to know and to work with, have worked with some of the people who were taking on a leadership role in that community, right? You're better able to be effective or be of assistance. So certainly the Rainbow Coalition provided that.

I would not call it a mass organization. You know, it's not like--we each had lots of contacts, and again, many of the people active in the Rainbow Coalition were there formally or informally as representatives of other organizations. So it certainly was possible to get large numbers of people mobilized in different things, but it's not like we had mass meetings or things like that. [pauses]

If you don't feel I'm being sufficiently responsive to your questions, you can ask me to go on more or if you want to rephrase it or whatever. I don't know how the responses are resonating with you.

SAUL 00:20:56

No, yeah, it's good, and I wanted to actually ask you to go a little bit more in depth on what you believe to be some of the coalition's strengths, some of its achievements, and if you think that if the Rainbow nationally and in Washington state has had a long term impact on yourself, as well as on electoral politics?

PHIL 00:21:17

You know, it's funny. I just had a conversation with a friend of mine, a group of us actually, from the National ACLU Board who are very close friends, and it was some issue having to do with Native Americans. I can't remember what it is now, currently, we're talking about like two weeks ago or whatever. And he said to me, in terms of his view, "Well, I have some close Native friends." He's up in Alaska. "I have some close Native friends. And this is--do you?" And I realized no, I don't, actually. I don't. So I'll use that, that's not contemporaneous with the period that you're referring to, but one of the main strengths of it was that it gave--let's say it would have given me an opportunity to be supportive or to be involved in something that was facing the Native American community, right? Where, organically, I did not already or previously or in other ways have connections. And I think that was very important.

I did not have a strong sense of the connection between the Washington State Rainbow Coalition and the National Rainbow Coalition. As I said to you, I did not take a leadership role in the coalition. I was particularly in the ACLU directing a lot of energy there. So I was content, even though, I guess, you know, you'd say I was an activist, sometimes you need to be a good follower, you know? So it's okay, too.

But that's in terms of historical experiences. You know, like interactions over the years with Larry, who I met through the Rainbow Coalition, and he asked me to keynote his kickoff campaign because he knew me, and he wanted someone, I guess, who wasn't an African American, you know what I'm saying, to show wider appeal and wider support. Well, those kinds of associations. It's not like Larry and I were really close friends, but you know, we certainly were involved in issues many, many times. And it turned out, as you may know, he had a gay brother who passed away of AIDS and so forth, and I had a lover who died of AIDS. So there were other ways in which people had overlapping associations, some of which didn't come out until much later. But it was a structure, it was a network in my impression. And not having been a leader in it, that's the way I related to it. And yes, of course, it's affected me and stayed with me.

SAUL 00:24:38

Awesome. Do you think that impact can be seen today?

PHIL 00:24:43

Of the Rainbow Coalition, or you mean on me?

SAUL 00:24:46

Of the Rainbow Coalition, on electoral politics today.

PHIL 00:24:50

Yes, history is prelude, isn't it? You're the history major, right? How would you trace it? Well, you would trace it through looking at the empowerment of some of the communities that the Rainbow Coalition manifested or expressed, or whatever, right? And it's quite clear that those communities have, in different ways, gotten stronger and more vocal. Lots of subsequent movements fed into that, like in the African American community, the Black Lives Matter movement.

And then, of course, there were cross cutting movements like the feminist movement, which was not explicitly a part of the Rainbow Coalition, but of course, many of the people involved in the Rainbow Coalition were strong feminists. And I was the second man who became an associate member of the what was then called the Women's Studies department at the UW, so I'm not just talking about women or so forth, I'm talking about the movement, the ideology of feminism and so forth.

So I think definitely if we look back on politics in Washington State today, you can see those kinds of manifestations, you know. It was a way, for example, I'll speak, let's say, in terms of the gay community. It was a way to get support from communities which in other states and other places might have been expressing hostility to the community, right? Like conservative Black pastors at Southern churches or something like that. Well, we had strong connections, and of course, we had strongly progressive Black pastors, like Pastor [Dr. Robert] Jeffrey at New Hope [Missionary] Baptist. But the Rainbow Coalition was a way of having that support more formally, so that, yes, I think it helped strengthen the different components. This cross fertilization, cross support definitely helped.

And we see that today, because certainly--and I don't want it to be too Seattle centric, but as you look at the political scene today in Seattle, these various communities are quite well-organized, quite strong, quite articulate, quite able to make their needs known and their views known, and so forth. And so I do think historically, the Rainbow played a role in that development.

SAUL 00:28:06

Awesome. And then, what challenges, if any, did the Washington State Rainbow Coalition face?

PHIL 00:28:16

Well, it faced the challenges that all progressive organizations face. That's to say, most of the people around you are not where you're at politically, and the challenge is how to get them to become more progressive. I mean, we see this going on today with things having to do with the war between Israel in Gaza, right? And there are different ways in which to try to do that, and the Rainbow Coalition was involved in some of them.

There was--I'm trying to remember whether it was an official Rainbow event. There was some attempt at holding some kind of like a tribunal. I don't know if it was to pass judgment on the US government's pressures on the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua or on Cuba, you know, hands off Cuba kind of thing. And I think that I remember being with Juan Bocanegra at this particular, I have a very clear memory of it. I don't know whether that was officially a Rainbow event, you know what I mean?

But then other things, frankly, like the WTO [World Trade Organization] stuff came in and sort of took over a lot of space. The Rainbow Coalition by then was not really around or visible. It might have legally or in the minds off a few people still existed, but there were other kinds of factors, or major political, social things, which seemed to take over the space. You know, I think the WTO situation is an important example of that. But I mean, the Rainbow Coalition was not particularly interested in trade issues, it wasn't particularly interested in foreign kinds of things other than US imperialism. And the organizing around the WTO, which many of the Rainbow Coalition people were involved in, but not as the Rainbow Coalition, the organizing around the WTO became incredibly important globally and still is. I was very much involved in that. So I think that's a good example of the fact that other events and other issue areas maybe took up the space, and the Rainbow Coalition could be said to have well served its time. But social movements sometimes end, you know, they don't necessarily go on forever.

SAUL 00:31:19

Definitely, and what is your understanding of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition's mission? Did it coincide with the mission of the National Rainbow?

PHIL 00:31:29

I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. And the mission, well, there must have been a mission statement, right? Is there a mission statement of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition? Can you read it to me? Is it short?

SAUL 00:31:34

I don't have it with me right now, but I'll read it to you after.

PHIL 00:31:52

Okay, but that would be interesting to reflect on whether I felt that it achieved its mission or stayed truthful to its mission. I would imagine that my answer would be yes, but I don't remember the actual mission statement. Do you think we can take a two minute break and look for it online or something like that?

SAUL 00:32:22

Sure.

PHIL 00:32:23

I'd be really interested in answering that, trying to answer that question, do you have it? [BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

SAUL 00:32:33

And then, what impact did President Imogene Bowen resigning in 1995 have on the organization?

PHIL 00:32:41

I don't know. I didn't know her, and I don't know.

SAUL 00:32:49

All right. When did you decide to leave the organization, and why?

PHIL 00:32:55

I don't know that I ever quote "decided to lead the organization." My recollection is that it slowly--the air went out of the balloon sort of slowly. And as I said to you before, I think that's because organizing within the different sectors and the different communities took off, and support from other communities was provided more intuitively or organically without the need of a formal entity called "the coalition." That's sort of my best recollection or feeling, I don't remember a specific event, or I might be wrong, I might just not remember it, but that, I think that's what sort of happened, as I recall it.

SAUL 00:34:04

And you might have already touched on this briefly, but what would you consider to be some of the organization's legacies?

PHIL 00:34:15

I definitely think that the strong ethnic, racial, et cetera communities that exist today in part owe their positions, their strengths to the fact that the coalition existed and was a mechanism by which we were able to help each other. I definitely--I don't know that it's much recognized today. There aren't many people who that I'm aware of that talk in politics today about the Rainbow Coalition, but I think looking back at it, that it certainly contributed to the existing strength of local organizations, and they've come very far. Let's just take El Centro. I mean, El Centro now has built low-income housing, it's got a whole development up there on Beacon Hill. It's not just a ratty old schoolhouse. I remember going into it and working with them there when it was a ratty old

schoolhouse. So I think the Rainbow Coalition can, one can attribute to the Rainbow Coalition assisting in the growing strength and success of the local communities.

Obviously, there's still always a lot of work to be done in each of these areas. It's not like the job is ever over. We used to say in the civil liberties community that civil liberties are never won, you always have to refight the same things, right? Look at women's reproductive health as the most startling example. Okay, so, but of course, the communities are in stronger position to fight some of these battles now than they were fifty years ago, one can argue. It's not fifty years for the Rainbow Coalition, it's more like thirty years, but yeah.

SAUL 00:36:44

Okay, and then, based on what we talked about, what lessons did you learn in the Rainbow Coalition that can be valuable for today?

PHIL 00:37:07

You know, one always has lessons to learn. And one could say objectively, "Oh, I had white boy privilege," you know. And so you learn, to that extent, how to be comfortable with people who are different. Right now, growing up in New York City at the time, there were always interactions with people who were very different, right? I came from a Jewish family, as I think I mentioned to you, and my mother worked with an Italian Catholic woman, they were very close. And the first time my former wife and I went to Europe, we went to Rome, and her name was Helen, and I got her a medal of Saint Helen, and we went to a thing where the pope was, and he blessed people, so then we brought the medal back. You know what I mean? Even though I'm not Catholic, and this whole thing to me doesn't make a lot of sense, she was over the moon. She was so happy that Philip brought back this medal that the pope had blessed for her.

So we always--I did grow up not very insular in that regard, but the Rainbow Coalition was an opportunity to--I didn't look at it as an opportunity in my reflecting back, it was a situation which opened up opportunities to deepen. And you know, I can look around now and say my closest best friends are still white people, that's true. Not all for sure, but the fact is, I'm really quite comfortable if I'm in a situation with, well, like Cindy [Domingo], who's Filipina, you know what I mean? And it's not a big thing, our cultural differences. We understand them, we appreciate them, and we just do our stuff together. So the Rainbow Coalition in terms of personal development and growth, I think that was an important context for me to continue my political social development, yes, yes.

And it's good to have a mechanism to really say, "Hey, I can help do something about this problem, even though it doesn't affect me directly." Right? And provide that kind of support. And it's not transactional. It's not like you do it because, you know, "Oh, when we are fighting against these attempts to repeal the Seattle ordinances, the Black community will support us." You don't do it, and the Rainbow Coalition was never done in that kind of a transactional kind of thing. But in fact, my mother, may she rest in peace, always said, "Each hand washes the other." And that's what it was, each hand was washing the other, yeah.

SAUL 00:40:36

Awesome. And is there anything that you wanted to talk about that we didn't get the chance to mention in this interview?

PHIL 00:40:45

No, I asked you some questions before we actually started recording about what's going to happen with it and so forth. About how many people do you think you expect to be interviewing?

SAUL 00:40:58

Oh yeah, let me stop recording, then.